

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

from the Pacific Garden Mission, Chicago, Illinois

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Chapter Seven

Ben Engstrom and the Search

SIXTY-ONE years of life for me are gone! During forty-three of those years I was on a hunting expedition. It went on night and day, first this way, then that way, sometimes it was one person, again another, one type of work, but not for long. There was a gnawing restlessness tormenting me always. At times I thought I couldn't stand it a minute longer.

When it came to a job, it was not the regular kind that would do for me. Oh, no! What I was after was something really exciting.

It looked as though I had the makings of a ball player.

There seemed to be no question about my ability to hit, run and throw. Many a fellow would jump at a chance of a career in baseball and stay with the game, if he had some promise.

I remember after one game a Mr. Brown approached me.

"Say, Benny, I've been waiting for ya', boy! You played a nice game today."

"Thanks. It's a lot of fun to be on a winning team," I returned.

"Yeah . . . and, I'm startin' a new semi-pro team next season-how about playing third base for me?"

Well, I played quite a lot of ball around the old hot corner the next season for Mr. Brown's semi-pro team. Toward the end of the season I was being scouted by the pro teams, but there was that old restlessness sweeping over me again. Baseball wasn't what I needed. What was it that would settle me? I had consented to go with the ball fans for a drink after the games. That spelled big

stuff and naturally I loved it. The music in the cabarets was in itself intoxicating; I loved it, too.

"Some people may sing for their supper, but not Benny. Notice, he dances for his drinks!" That quip Mr. Brown flung out during a particularly wild affair.

That was life, ball games and dances and drinks. It was bound to happen, the ball games lost out and the dance took over and claimed all my attention.

There were girls! No one girl in particular, just the idea of being in love, I guess. And that "search" continued, don't forget. Oh, I didn't know that was what it was. But just the same, I was searching.

Then along came Florence and her brother Leo. I married Florence, but I can see now how great an influence Leo had on me at that time.

Leo was on the road as manager of a theatrical troupe.

It wasn't long before I became interested in show business.

George M. Cohan was the rage in those days, and I loved doing an impersonation of him. I used to put my hat on the way he did, sit down on a box, take a puff on a cigarette, then carelessly toss the cigarette away and begin to recite his piece that went something like this: "We're born, we live a while, then we die. Life's a funny proposition, after all . . . "

That was not a mere recitation for me. I believed that, mind you.

Finally, though, I got out of show business. Florence just put her foot down and declared she wasn't going to have a "country-jumper" for a husband. Another thing, she threatened to leave me if I didn't give up drinking. So I quit show business and promised to be a different man.

We went to Gary, Indiana, to make our home. There in that great industrial city of over one hundred thousand people, I searched out one of the biggest steel mills to apply for a job. I was inexperienced, so I took the first work they offered me.

A few years rolled by with everything going fine. The promotion helped, certainly what went with it did, because there were now four children to be fed and clothed and sent to school.

Was the restlessness only a memory by that time? By no means, for the same old feeling inched up on me, and I recognized it although it came disguised as a hot ambition to get ahead at the steel mill.

Florence had been gone some time when I hit the top at the mill. It was in my twenty-fourth year with the firm. I was made general electrical foreman of one of the biggest divisions in the place. Then I married again and got started drinking in earnest. One day at the mill the first rumblings of trouble began:

"You're drinking on the job, Ben. This is the only warning you get." That came from the boss.

I took one of those famous "cures," laid off for a while, then found myself hitting the bottle once again. And first thing I knew the boss was saying:

"This is really tough, Ben . . . we've worked together twenty-nine years . . . but this has got to be it. You're through."

Now where was I to go, and what was I to do? Pretty soon I hit Chicago - and Skid Row! I did odd jobs around dance halls and washed dishes in cheap night clubs.

I was staggering south on State Street one day and at Harrison and State ran on a bunch of men standing listening to a fine-looking big fellow who was making some kind of speech. It was Harry Saulnier of Pacific Garden Mission, and something he was saying about electricity made me stop.

I got acquainted with Saulnier that day when he put his big arm around my shoulder and tried to lead me to CHRIST. It was not until three years later that I saw him again.

One afternoon in March, 1945, at Cook County Hospital, Chicago, a doctor looked me over, then gave me this report:

"You've got to go to an institution where you can be properly cared for." Drink had me all but in the grave, and I fought feebly to get away. Then I remembered Saulnier and Pacific Garden Mission. The doctor gave me a dime and an hour later I stumbled into the mission, to find the one person I thought might help me.

Filthy, dirty, unshaven, I must have been a terrible sight.

I sat through the meeting with but one thought - there must be a change. On my knees, with Harry Saulnier beside me, the greatest transaction of life was entered into. I can never forget it, for that night in the old prayer room the Lord JESUS came into my heart and Benny Engstrom's "search" was over!

I knew it was real - the change that swept into my life - next day when I reached into my pockets and found four one-dollar bills in my hand. I was standing in front of a tavern at the time - and the door was open. I might have stood there a minute - maybe two - but my four dollars went back into my pocket, and I went back to the old mission. The Son of GOD gave me the strength to do that, or I wouldn't be living today to tell the story.

I'm the engineer at the Pacific Garden Mission, and do everything from complicated electrical repairs to mending wooden legs.

Truly, when Christ takes hold of a man's life as He did mine, he's . . . UNSHACKLED!

~ end of chapter 7 ~
